

Eco-Sensitive Zones of Western Ghats

Why in news?

Karnataka, Maharashtra and Goa seek shrinking of eco-sensitive areas in Western Ghats.

What are Eco-Sensitive Zones?

- **Conception** - The concept of ESZ was conceived during the XXI meeting of the Indian Board for Wildlife held in 2002, when the *Wildlife Conservation Strategy, 2002* was adopted.
- The *National Wildlife Action Plan (NWAP) (2002-2016)* indicated that 'Areas outside the protected area network are often vital ecological corridor links and must be protected to prevent isolation of fragments of bio-diversity which will not survive in the long run.
- *National Environment Policy (2006)* has defined the ESZ.
- **Definition** - An areas/zones with *identified environmental resources* having incomparable values *which require special attention* for their conservation" because of its landscape, wildlife, biodiversity, historical and natural values.
- **Declaration** - They are *declared by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)* as per the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- **Coverage** - The lands falling **within 10kms of the boundaries** of national parks and sanctuaries should be notified as eco-fragile zones under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- While the 10-km rule is implemented as a general principle, the extent of its application can vary.
- Areas *beyond 10-km can also be notified* by the Union government as ESZs, if they hold larger ecologically important "*sensitive corridors.*"
- **Purpose** - *Protect environment* and *avoid its degradation* due to anthropogenic activities.
- Create some kind of barrier/ *shock absorber for the specialized ecosystem* (PAs).
- Act as *transition zone* from areas of higher protection to areas involving lesser protection.
- **Objective** - To maintain the response level of an ecosystem within the permissible limits w.r.t environmental parameters.
- To notify the area as an Eco- sensitive zone and to *regulate the developmental activities* in a sustainable manner taking into consideration the needs and aspiration of the local people.
- **Salient features of ESZ** - The ESZ Notification captures the following features:
 - Brief on the Protected Area
 - Area of ESZ and Extent of ESZ (Minimum and Maximum)
 - Available Flora, Fauna [Including Endemic, Rare, Endangered and Threaten (RET) species]
 - Boundary Description of ESZ
 - Maps of the ESZ
 - Geo-coordinates of prominent locations of PA and ESZ along with Shape/ KML files
 - List of villages along with Geo-co-ordinates
 - General guideline on Zonal Master Plan
 - Measures to be taken by the State Government
- Prohibited and Regulated Activities along with Promoted Activities
- Details of Monitoring Committee
- It does ***not involve displacement and evacuation*** of farmers/people living in the villages.

A TO Z OF THE ESZ
The laws and guidelines that govern Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs)

ESZs are notified around protected areas by the Centre on the basis of surveys done by states, to provide a buffer against development activities

106 National Parks | **567** Wildlife Sanctuaries

The Wildlife Conservation Strategy, 2002, provides for a **10-km-wide ESZ**, but the actual extent varies, depending on local factors

THE 2011 GUIDELINES
Three types of activities

PERMITTED (like farming) **PROHIBITED** (like mining)

REGULATED (like construction of hotels and road-widening)

June 3, 2022
The Supreme Court mandates a **minimum 1-km ESZ** around all protected areas; imposes construction freeze

April 26, 2023: The SC **exempts 659 ESZs** for which the Centre has issued notifications or received proposals. But ban on mining up to 1 km stays even if the ESZ is marked at the zero line

What are the Prohibited, Regulated and Permitted activities in ESZs?

Prohibited activities

- *Commercial mining*, but it will not prohibit the digging of earth for construction for repair of houses and for manufacture of country tiles or bricks for personal consumption.
- Setting of saw mills
- Setting of *industries causing pollution* (water, air, soil, noise etc)
- *Commercial use of firewood*
- Establishment of *major hydroelectric projects*
- Use or production of any *hazardous substances*
- Undertaking activities related to *tourism* like over-flying the National Park area by any aircraft, hot-air balloons
- *Discharge of effluent and solid waste* in natural water bodies or terrestrial area.

Regulated activities

- Felling of trees
- Establishment of hotels
- Drastic change of agriculture systems
- Commercial use of natural water resources including ground water harvesting
- Erection of electrical cables be regulated while underground cabling should be promoted
- Fencing of premises of hotels and lodges
- Use of polythene bags by shopkeepers
- Widening of roads should be done with proper EIA and mitigation measures
- Movement of vehicular traffic at night for commercial purpose
- Introduction of exotic species
- Protection of hill slopes and river banks
- Air and vehicular pollution
- Sign boards & hoardings.

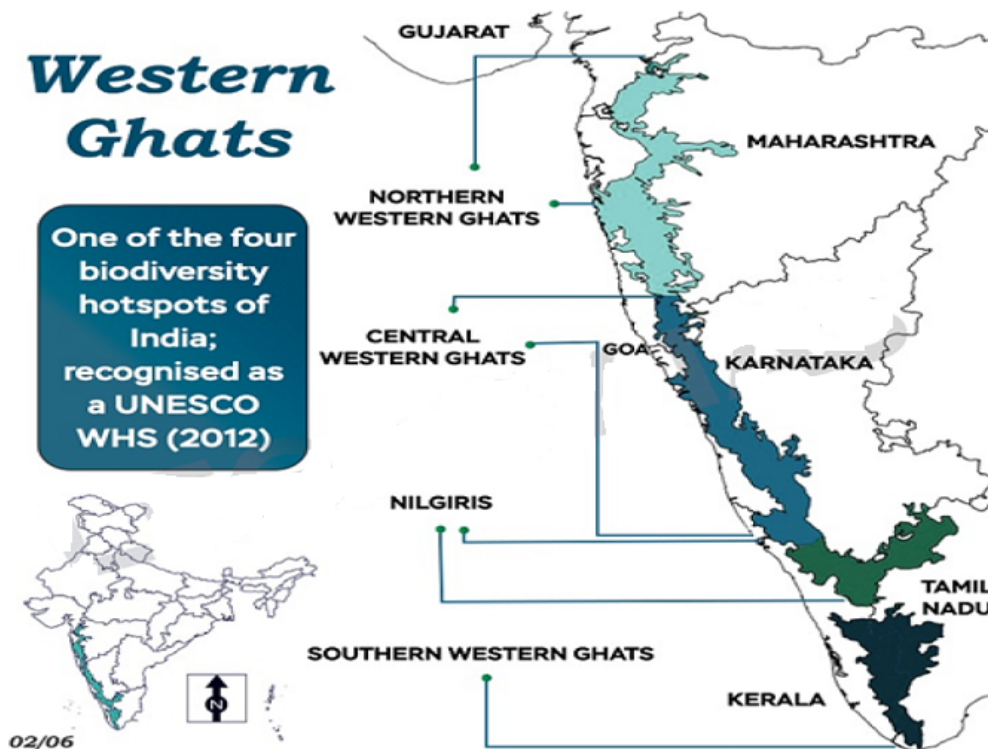
Permitted activities

- Ongoing *agriculture and horticulture practices* by local communities.
- However, excessive expansion of some of these activities should be regulated as per the master plan.

- Rain water harvesting
- Organic farming
- Use of renewable energy sources
- Adoption of green technology

Why Western Ghats is important?

- **Western Ghats** - They are mountain ranges that runs parallel to the western coast of the Indian peninsula, located entirely in India.
- **Coverage** - It extends along six states of India.
- They are Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.



- **Biodiversity** - It has over 7,402 species of flowering plants, 1,814 species of non-flowering plants, 139 mammal species, 508 bird species, 179 amphibian species, 6,000 insects species and 290 freshwater fish species.
- **Measures** - Gadgil and Kasturirangan committee were appointed to identify the areas that needed to be kept out from such activities.
- **The Kasturirangan panel** - It had identified **37% of the Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive** and recommended prohibition or regulation of certain activities.
- **Gadgil Commission** - The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) also known as the Gadgil Commission has designated the **entire hill range as an ESA.**
- **Recognition** - It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is one of the eight "hot-spots" of biological diversity in the world.

What are the major concerns in declaring ESZs?

- **Development Restrictions** - Limits on construction, infrastructure projects, and industrial activities can hinder economic growth and development in the region.
- **Livelihood Impact** - Restrictions can affect local communities, particularly those dependent on land and natural resources for their livelihoods, such as agriculture, forestry, and mining.
- **Property Rights** - Landowners may face limitations on how they can use or develop their property, potentially leading to conflicts and disputes.

- **Economic Loss** - Potential loss of revenue for state and local governments due to reduced industrial and commercial activities.
- **Implementation Challenges** - Ensuring effective enforcement of ESA regulations can be difficult, requiring substantial resources and coordination among various government agencies.
- **Balancing Conservation and Development** - Finding a middle ground that protects the environment while allowing for necessary development is often challenging.

What lies ahead?

- **Implement a zoning system** - Designates specific areas for conservation, sustainable agriculture, limited development, and urbanization.
- This helps in managing human activities while protecting critical ecosystems.
- **Involve community participation** - They should be allowed to participate in conservation planning and decision-making.
- Empower them with knowledge and resources to manage natural resources sustainably.
- **Promote economic diversification** - This will reduce dependency on activities of local communities that harm the environment.
- Develop alternative livelihood opportunities, such as eco-tourism, agroforestry, and handicrafts.
- **Strengthen the legal and policy framework** - Enforce existing environmental laws and regulations, and update them to address emerging challenges.

References

1. [The Indian Express| Plans to Reduce ESZ in Western Ghats](#)
2. [MoEFCC| Eco Sensitive Zones \(ESZ\)](#)

